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Fort Wayne gamblers, 1865-
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Fort Wayne Gamblers

1865-1900

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FORT WAYNE GAMBLERS

1865 - 1900

Prepared by the Staff of the
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FOREWORD

Since earliest times, gambling has exerted an almost universal appeal. In early cultures, games of chance enjoyed ceremonial importance; successful participants were often credited with supernatural powers. More often, however, gambling has been regarded as a social evil, and repressive action has been taken against it.

In Fort Wayne, the rapid urban growth which followed the Civil War fostered widespread organized gambling. The following brief summary of late nineteenth-century gambling activities in Fort Wayne has been compiled from newspaper accounts and general works of the period. The Boards and the Staff of the Public Library of Fort Wayne and Allen County present this publication in the hope that it will entertain and inform the many historically minded citizens of the area:



Mason Long

Following the Civil War, while speculation in railroads, oil fields, banks, and life insurance was widespread throughout the nation, Fort Wayne was invaded by a horde of professional gamblers, thieves, and confidence men. Attracted by the railroads which converged here, they perfected so many schemes for fleecing the unwary traveler that the railroads later felt constrained to employ private detectives in order to protect the passengers. Citizens of Fort Wayne were victimized by a band of thieves and gamblers organized under the leadership of the notorious Edward Ryan. Public indignation reached the breaking point in 1867 when a stranger was robbed at a local railroad station; an angry mob burned Ryan's saloon to the ground and forced his hasty departure from town. The desire for reform was short-lived, however, and the gamblers met with little opposition when they resumed their games.

In his autobiography, *MASON LONG, THE CONVERTED GAMBLER*, the author stated that he was only an average ambitious youth until he was introduced to gambling in the army. "Gaming," he said, "afforded a relief to the monotony of camp life and produced excitement which withdrew the attention of the boys from the perils they were undergoing." Through diligent practice, Long became the regimental champion at chuck-a-luck, and by the end of the war he had accumulated enough money to buy a grocery store in Fort Wayne. Here he was introduced to whisky, "as medicine only," and resumed his gambling activities under the aegis of John Sterling, a proprietor of the infamous Lodge Saloon.

Long's formative years as a professional gambler were spent in the company of experts from New York, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, and Cleveland, who had been attracted to the wide-open games that could always be found in downtown Fort Wayne in those days. Long declared, however, that after Ryan's precipitate flight "the confidence men deserted Fort Wayne, and this city began to lose its prominence as a gaming center. These thieves had lost a large part of their booty to the professional sports, and when they departed, the gamblers found themselves short

of victims. The thieves robbed the greenhorns and in turn lost their 'swag' at the faro bank or the poker table, taking to the road as soon as they were 'broke' for the purpose of replenishing their exchequers. Those were indeed lively times in Indiana."

Nevertheless, Long apparently found Fort Wayne profitable enough for him to devote almost full time to its exploitation. Although he was sometimes "busted" hundreds of miles away from Columbia Street in his pursuit of race horses and other gambling pleasures, he always returned here for a fresh start in his chosen profession.

Keno, which Long thought fascinating (perhaps because he could never win at it), was similar to bingo; the stakes, however, were invariably high. Long declared that the game was most often played by amateurs, as professional gamblers realized the inevitability of losing to the house. Faro, on the other hand, was an elaborate banking game which appealed to amateurs and professionals alike. Played on a layout which was a tableau of one complete suit painted on a green cloth or tabletop, it consisted primarily of bets placed with the banker on the order or frequency with which certain cards would appear in a silver dealing box. Players were offered any of twenty-one different ways to bet on each new card that appeared. The FORT WAYNE GAZETTE called it "the most absorbing game carried on in Fort Wayne."

By the fall of 1873, Long was operating a sumptuous saloon and gambling house at 74 Calhoun Street. Outfitted with huge mirrors, Brussels carpet, and ponderous black walnut furniture, his rooms over the saloon were doing such a brisk business that he was obliged to operate two games simultaneously. During the Northern Indiana Fair of 1874, Long was again forced to expand in order to accommodate his eager patrons; three faro tables and one of rouge et noir barely managed to satisfy all the gentlemen who clamored to place bets. The same delightful problem faced Long at the Soldiers Reunion which was also held here in 1874.

Mason Long was not the only gambler in Fort Wayne during this period. A flourishing keno game was located



..a sumptuous saloon.....

over The Office, a saloon on Berry Street. Nearby was an establishment which operated a full-time faro game for many years; that particular den had become, in the words of the GAZETTE, "one of the institutions of Fort Wayne." In addition, transient gamblers often rented rooms in the downtown area for short periods and parlayed small stakes into minor fortunes within a few days, only to lose them again later in other places.

Editorial indignation, of course, was not lacking concerning this serious civic problem. The FORT WAYNE NEWS used its columns both as a weapon against gamblers and as a goad for Chief of Police "Mike" Singleton. Chief Singleton, characterized by Long as bold and clever, was hampered as a guardian of law and order by weak city ordinances and the general apathy of most citizens. He led raids against known gambling houses whenever he was reasonably certain of obtaining a conviction. But to convict was almost impossible because of the difficulty of proving law violation after gambling devices had been secreted in locked rooms and in clever hiding places. Gamblers who were arrested and taken to jail raised the nominal bond required, jumped bail, and left town for a short time until it was again safe to return. Long stated that his rooms were raided about three times in an average year and that he had paid the city treasury approximately three thousand dollars in bail over a period of ten years.

Long elaborated on this theme, calling to mind for the modern reader the slapstick comedy of early movies:

"I have known the police to work for weeks devising some plan for bagging a nest of sports. They usually chose a time when the gamblers were supposed to be flush in order that the city treasury might receive a 'benefit.' They often scaled buildings, climbed ladders, let themselves down from the roofs through skylights, disguised themselves in citizens' clothes, and, in fact, resorted to all manner of stratagems in order to capture the gentlemen who 'buck the tiger.'"

In 1875 the FORT WAYNE SENTINEL championed Chief Singleton and advocated a liberal use of the grand jury



....to capture the gentlemen...

to eliminate the various gambling rooms from the city. "There are now," the newspaper stated, "according to common report, a larger number of gaming rooms in operation in this city than ever before, except during the war. There are more well-dressed loafers hanging around the corners with no visible means of support than at any time for years past. It is stated on good authority that in the heart of the city, within one block of the Aveline House, there are from three to five gambling hells in constant operation, both day and night. Their locations may be plainly discovered from the mobs of loafers which hang around them."

Long has given a hint as to one important reason for civic inaction:

"One of my sporting enterprises in Fort Wayne was a private 'clubroom' for gentlemen. This place was frequented by some of the leading businessmen and wealthiest citizens of Fort Wayne who liked to play among themselves, but did not desire to come in contact with regular sporting men. They were bankers, capitalists, merchants, city and county officials, and other men of that class."

Eventually, Long's luck changed. What the newspapers facetiously called "Mace Long's Bazaar" and "Mace Long's Confectionery" in time became the rendezvous for many undesirable characters in town; the "bankers and other men of that class" presumably moved on to another gambler's tables. In their stead were now "blear-eyed bummers, whisky bloats, and deadbeats." After squandering his money on foolish trinkets and at race tracks, Long began to drink more heavily than ever before. The "medicinal purposes" of whisky were long since forgotten and had given way to prolonged drinking bouts and attacks of delirium tremens. Long later "took the pledge" at a spectacular temperance rally held in the city in 1877. Shortly afterward he abandoned his cards and tables, joined a church, and began his famous series of lectures on the evils of drink and gambling. In this worthy enterprise he was sponsored by the Blue Ribbon Association, a Midwestern temperance group that had grown out of the tempestuous Moody-Sankey revival meetings in Chicago. Although the gamblers and

saloonkeepers of the city sourly asserted that "Mace" was merely playing a confidence game and that in time he would disappear with some trusting do-gooder's money, they were mistaken. Long became a sincere reformer thereafter, testifying on the platform throughout the Midwest. He was also engaged in writing and selling his two moralistic books, **SAVE THE GIRLS**, which dealt with the problem of "fallen women," and **THE CONVERTED GAMBLER**.

Although widespread gambling in Fort Wayne diminished after the conversion of Long, professional gamblers still did a flourishing business in a few upstairs rooms on Calhoun and Berry streets. Several newspapers took it upon themselves to describe to their readers the pitfalls of the more popular games of chance; poker, faro, and keno were painted in the blackest hues by reporters who had obviously indulged and lost painfully in those pastimes.

The **GAZETTE** of February 13, 1881, contained perhaps the most elaborate analysis of the problem; charges were also made that a number of poker rooms, patronized by prominent officials, church members, and businessmen, were running day and night within the city. Dating from this period, Fort Wayne newspapers printed more and more articles which dealt with the gambling problems of other cities. Reprints of humorous "con game" stories were followed by the tragedy of a youth's suicide outside an Indianapolis faro room, or the heart-rending portrayal of a gambler's deserted and starving wife and children.

For all the sound and fury that local violations of law evoked on the pages of our newspapers, there seems to have been an inadequate understanding of what gambling was. One outstanding illustration of the difficulty is seen in the **GAZETTE'S** article entitled "A Lucky Pair," dated April 25, 1882. In it Mr. Souser and Mr. Whitney were congratulated for winning \$15,000 apiece in the famous Louisiana Lottery. Mrs. Souser, in an interview with a **GAZETTE** reporter, revealed that her husband had "speculated in lottery tickets for some three years." It is certain that if Souser had been apprehended at a downtown faro table, his gambling activities would have been condemned by the paper.

But the statement concerning his participation in lotteries was printed without comment. Thus it was that the lottery and the general principles underlying all gambling were unintentionally given favorable notice in the columns of a notoriously anti-gambling newspaper. As a side light to the affair, the SENTINEL casually mentioned in August of that year that Whitney was said to have lost most of his \$15,000 at J. W. Hall's faro tables.

The practice of infrequent police raids did not successfully curb gambling. Most gamblers, like Dennis McFeeley and J. W. Hall, still looked upon bail as a kind of license fee, which they cheerfully paid for the privilege of operating in the city. Respectable citizens had little to fear if they were apprehended in gambling rooms. When McFeeley's establishment was raided on August 9, 1882, twenty well-known gentlemen were arrested and fined. A SENTINEL reporter was at the scene, but only threats, and no names, appeared in the paper.

On September 27, 1887, a warning was issued from police headquarters that every known gambling room would be watched and promptly raided if the slightest suspicion existed concerning illegal activities. The numerous gamblers throughout the city were astonished to hear that the laws were at last to be enforced. All up and down Calhoun Street--at McFeeley's, at Oliver's, at Meader's--bartenders belowstairs turned away the regular habitués with the comment, "Game's closed!" The poker room over the Crystal Billiard Hall was silent, and countless "clubrooms" all over the city were shuttered and tenantless. An old reformed gambler, unidentified but sounding like Mason Long, was quoted by the GAZETTE as saying: "I hope the police authorities will continue in their good work."

Although the old games were quick to disappear under this pressure, the old gamblers did not respond in a similar fashion. They soon adopted new devices and learned the intricacies of new games. Their patrons, after the first flurry of fright had passed, returned to lose again in new locations. One of the first games to gain a foothold in the recently reformed city was a so-called "policy game."



...turned away the regular habitués...

Laborers from all over Fort Wayne were soon betting on numbers drawn in a lottery at Covington, Kentucky. The existing laws were easily circumvented by the practice of accepting bets and paying winnings at crowded public places; a direct wire from Covington to a room at 30 West Main Street relayed the results of each day's drawing. At about this time slot machines made their first appearance in the city; here as elsewhere, they proved to be immensely popular.

The state legislature granted Fort Wayne a new city charter in 1894, and the city immediately received the benefits of a committee on public safety. Such boards or committees had been designed for the specific purpose of eliminating crime, and it was not long before gamblers felt the effectiveness of the new weapon. The Board of Public Safety announced in the columns of the GAZETTE that the old practice of infrequent raids and subsequent fines was to be abandoned. In the future a warning would be given, after which the full weight of the law would descend upon all violators. However, the effectiveness of the Board depended upon the sincerity and vigor of each political administration. The election of C. B. Oakley as mayor on an independent reform platform that same year enabled the Board to work successfully; most gambling activities were discouraged for the time being.

By 1897 newspapers were distressed by the laxity that had again overtaken City Hall. "Gambling is very generally carried on, as well as other evils," said the GAZETTE of January 3. The FORT WAYNE JOURNAL of November 17, 1898, condoned the use of gambling in promoting carnivals and street fairs but heartily condemned the faro games, poker players, and slot machines which had followed the carnivals into town and had remained when the festivities were over. This paper, too, did not seem to realize that it was exhibiting a puzzling inconsistency on this important question. In spite of the sincere and well-intentioned efforts of the authorities and reformers, gambling has continued to be an ever-present social problem in the twentieth century.



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